

To save the city, first they destroy it

By Michael Duffy

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THE new planning powers given to Frank Sartor this week received a lot of publicity. But really they do little more than speed the destruction of so much that was good about this city.

The rape of Sydney continues. Driven by a fundamentalist belief in urban consolidation, the concrete armies are penetrating one of the last bastions of the old city. The municipality of Ku-ring-gai held out for longer than most, but in 2004 it was forced to adopt a residential development strategy, permitting the eventual construction of about 400 apartment blocks, most probably five storeys high, that will destroy much of the area's character and amenity. They will join 240 medium-density buildings approved since 1998 for over-55 housing.

Urban consolidation is allegedly about sustainability, but in fact - as many other parts of Sydney already know - it produces the opposite. The Mayor of Ku-ring-gai, Elaine Malicki, says: "We did an infrastructure study that told us we could sustain 10 per cent growth reasonably comfortably, and 15 per cent at the absolute outside." The strategy imposed by the State Government will increase the area's population by 22 per cent and its number of dwellings by 38 per cent (because new ones are smaller than old ones). "The railway won't be able to cope," Malicki says.

Ku-ring-gai has a large number of beautiful streets near the highway full of houses built between the world wars and earlier. Among the glories of Australian domestic architecture, they and nearby areas are surrounded by a vast canopy of trees. In 1996 the National Trust identified 28 precincts to be protected as urban conservation areas. But these precincts were close to the railway line, in the areas the Government wanted to fill with flats. Those precincts remain unlisted.

Under plans approved this week, Turramurra, an awkward and traffic-unfriendly centre straddling an X formed by the railway crossing the highway, will lose open space, gain more shops and be ringed by high apartment blocks. As there was no model to show what it will look like, Alan Parr, a member of Friends of Turramurra (which, like all other groups named here, is a residents' lobby group), knocked one up in a few days and has displayed it at the local Uniting Church. It shows a town centre with a density rare in Sydney.

"People have broken down and cried when they saw it," Parr says. "They had no idea."

The State Government insists that St Ives Village become a population centre, with up to 2000 new dwellings, even though it's poorly served by public transport. It stands close to the intersection of Mona Vale Road (bringing traffic from the Pittwater area to Ryde and Lane Cove) and the busy back route carrying vehicles from the upper North Shore and the Central Coast to the city.

Christiane Berlioz, president of the St Ives Progress Association, says the effect on local traffic will be horrendous. She asks: "Why create a new urban centre where there's no railway line?"

Like most residents of Ku-ring-gai, the people of St Ives don't want what's happening: the council website shows a survey of almost 2000 residents found they were happy with present levels of density and shops.

This prompts the question of why the Labor Government has been able to get away with the unpopular policy of banning significant new housing on the urban fringe and forcing 70 per

cent of new residences into existing areas. Despite the existence of an umbrella protest group called Save Our Suburbs, there has been no effective political opposition.

"People in other parts of Sydney face the same issues," says Berlioz. "There's not enough communication across the city on what's been happening. It's divide and conquer."

There is also a strong feeling among some that they've been let down by the politicians who should have been opposing the Government on this issue. Says Alan Parr bluntly: "The people of Ku-ring-gai have been abandoned by the Liberal Party."

Most of the environmental and other alleged benefits of urban consolidation were disproved years ago, as shown by books such as *The Perils of Urban Consolidation*, by Professor Patrick Troy, of the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University, and *Sprawl*, by Professor Robert Bruegmann, of the University of Illinois. (The Save Our Suburbs website has a good summary of the issues.) Those now destroying this beautiful city are in thrall to outdated ideas, and no doubt the odd property developer - although many developers would be as happy building on the outskirts, as in Killara.

The language used by the consolidators is frequently Orwellian. Villages are to be preserved by destroying them. Congestion is to be reduced by increasing density. Housing will be made more diverse by making everywhere look the same. Old people who settled in communities under the "Ageing in Place" government policy of the past decade are seeing those communities disintegrate and might have to move again. Urban consolidation is like socialism: the ideals are wonderful, the reality awful.

This week Anne Carroll and other members of Friends of Ku-ring-gai Environment showed me photos and drove me around some of the area's building sites, where five-storey blocks are replacing beautiful old homes, their windows looking down into the yards of the houses next door. It's depressing to see how much has already gone.

Other cities retain their old buildings, but here we pull everything down, as though we resent beauty and loathe our own past.